

ARTS IN REVIEW

CLASSICAL MUSIC



Brad Lubman conducts soprano Heather Buck and bass Ethan Herschenfeld in a performance of David Felder's 'Les Quatre Temps Cardinaux' (2013).

A Rust Belt Festival Revels in New Music

By ALLAN KOZINN

Buffalo, N.Y.

You may think of this Rust Belt city in western New York as the home of spicy chicken wings and epic snowstorms, but it also holds an important place in the hearts of new-music fans. Part of its reputation can be ascribed to the Buffalo Philharmonic, which has championed recent works ever since the composer Lukas Foss directed it, in the 1960s. Mostly, though, the city draws its new-music credibility from the University at Buffalo's annual June in Buffalo festival, a roughly weeklong flowering of concerts, lectures and composition master classes that dates back to 1975, when the experimentalist composer Morton Feldman founded it.

This year, the festival is celebrating the 40th anniversary of its founding, as well as its 30th year under the direction of the composer David Felder, who revived it in 1986 after a five-year hiatus. The festival has become an important lure during Mr. Felder's tenure: It would be hard to name more than a handful of major composers of the past 30 years who have not appeared on its faculty roster.

He has also expanded its goals. Last year, he added a performance institute, directed by the pianist Eric Huebner, in which expert new-music players teach young instrumentalists not only the niceties of modern performing techniques, but how to deal with thorny scores scheduled for performance while their ink is still wet—for instance, the works of the festival's composition stu-

On Thursday evening, a piano ensemble performed two early-'70s classics, Feldman's meditative "Five Pianos" and Steve Reich's mechanistically vital "Six Pianos." And on Friday evening, a delegation from the performance institute took to the stage of Kleinhans Music Hall, the home of the Buffalo Philharmonic, to play a program devoted largely to recent works by Augusta Read Thomas (her atmospheric, unpredictable "Scat" and the equally graceful, darker-hued "Passion Prayers," both conducted by Daniel Bassin) and her husband, Bernard Rands (the lush "Walcott Songs," in an alluring performance by the mezzo-soprano Julia Bentley and the cellist Veronica Nettles; and a solo flute work, "Memo 4," in which Emlyn Johnson moved easily between multiphonics and Syrinx-like melodic twists).

Morphing timbres and textures has become an important technique in the contemporary composer's toolbox. Mr. Felder has long been devoted to it; so was Feldman, and the final two evenings of concerts were a sort of Feldfest, showcasing works by the festival's founder and its current director.

Feldman's "On Time and the Instrumental Factor" opened the festival's final concert—a performance by the Buffalo Philharmonic, conducted by Stefan Sanders—on Sunday afternoon. Like many of his works, it is less about action or movement than about examination and pondering. Chords are sounded and held, sometimes briefly, sometimes at length, their instrumentation and balances shifting gradually. Not a lot happens, but if

of the festival's composition students.

The faculty and students join forces to perform this music; in fact, a highlight of a Saturday afternoon program devoted to new student works was Mr. Huebner's assured account of "Music for a Mad Scientist—300+ Microvariations on a Bach Theme," an explosively virtuosic solo piano work by Texu Kim. Mr. Kim, a South Korean composer who earned a chemistry degree before switching his focus to music, hid his Bach theme amid intensely chromatic Lisztian thunder, at first. But when the invigorating clatter briefly subsided, the score's internal joke became clear: The work's theme is the gently arpeggiated C major Prelude that opens "The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I."

Mr. Kim's work lasted little more than 10 minutes, and concision was a quality shared by his colleagues. Ying-Ting Lin's "The Journey" began murkily, with repeated bass tones in the piano punctuated by chordal bursts for bass clarinet and violin, but quickly grew into an engagingly varied, lively piece. Liliya Ugay played the assertive, steely piano line in her own "Third World Fable," but regularly ceded the spotlight, and some lovely, supple writing, to the violin and cello.

The student program's most satisfying work was its opener, Ryan Jespersen's "Souvenirs/Miniatures," a tightly focused piano trio that—like Ms. Ugay's work, but with a different accent—juxtaposed tense, sharp-edge keyboard angularity with luminous string writing rooted in 19th-century shapeliness.

The student performers took on established repertory as well.

ually. Not a lot happens, but if you consider the degree to which Feldman was influenced by abstract art, that makes sense: His works are the aural equivalent of nonrepresentational painting.

Mr. Felder's "Six Poems From Neruda's 'Alturas,'" an orchestral score inspired by the Pablo Neruda collection (but not a setting of it), is a more eventful piece. Dense and angular, it does not shy away from the sense of the tragic that suffuses Neruda; more often than not, it magnifies that spirit, by way of vivid wind, brass and percussion writing.

A more arresting example of Mr. Felder's recent work, "Les Quatre Temps Cardinaux," was performed on Saturday evening by Ensemble Signal and the Slee Sinfonietta, led by Brad Lubman. Scored for chamber orchestra, two vocal soloists—the soprano Heather Buck and the bass Ethan Herschenfeld—and 12 channels of electronic sound, this enveloping, hour-long piece weaves together poetry by René Daumal, Neruda, Robert Creeley and Dana Gioia to evoke turning points in life, mundane as well as critical.

The poems are heard not only in the spiky, emotionally intense vocal writing, but spoken on the recorded tracks, which also include percussion sounds and the sparkle, buzz and variegated growl of purely electronic timbres, all moving around a dozen speakers placed throughout the hall. Abstract video by Olivier Pasquet added atmosphere rather than commentary. All this could easily have become an exhibition of gimmickry, but Mr. Felder kept his grand audio-visual fabric focused, sober and often wrenching.

Festivals this earnest need occasional touches of eccentricity, and Harvey Sollberger provided them in a recital at Pausa Art House, a restaurant that presents concerts, on Friday night. Mr. Sollberger, a pioneering flutist, composer and conductor who has been a force at this festival from the start, put an odd sideline on display: He sang Neapolitan love songs, accompanying himself on the accordion. He is not much of a singer, but his passion for this music brought it amusingly to life. And midway through his set, he did what he is known for, offering brilliant accounts of his own "Riding the Wind II," an energetic solo flute work, rich in multiphonics and percussive techniques, and "Tetrakis," a little-known flute work by Giacinto Scelsi, from which he played the lyrical opening movement.

Mr. Kozinn writes about music.

Pepper ... And Salt

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"Don't let anyone call you a flightless bird. We're birds who choose to waddle."